

Coming of Age: Theater Special Operations Commands

By HENRY H. SHELTON



5th Special Forces Group jumping with British and Kuwaiti commandos.



MH-53J approaching crash site near Dubrovnik, Croatia.

U.S. Army (Tracy L. Leahy)

DOD

In Spring 1996, U.S. Special Operations Command, Europe (SOCEUR), was supporting the NATO Implementation Force in the former Yugoslavia. When the plane carrying the Secretary of Transportation crashed near Dubrovnik, SOCEUR

was tasked to employ its unique capabilities in a search and rescue effort. Special operations forces (SOF) helicopters searched by hovering up and down mountainsides in extremely hazardous weather conditions. A joint force comprised of Army Special Forces (SF), Navy Sea, Air, Land teams (SEALS), and both Air Force special tactics personnel and Pave Low helicopters located the downed aircraft. The SOCEUR commander then assumed total responsibility for the mission, organizing British, French, German, Spanish, Croat, and U.S. forces in the grim task of recovering the 35 victims of the crash.

With the recovery complete, the SOCEUR commander and his staff started their return trip to Stuttgart. While they were still in the air, a new mission arose. A deteriorating situation called for rapid evacuation of noncombatants from the civil war in Liberia.

EDITOR'S Note

During any given week in 1996, more than 4,600 special operations forces (SOF) personnel were deployed in 65 countries. From peace operations to combat, theater special operations commands (SOCs) have demonstrated their value in a wide range of missions. Their success has made SOCs active participants in peace engagement under the geographic CINCs. This is attributed both to the organizational structures created by Congress which institutionalized special operations and to joint doctrine. This body of doctrine defines the role of SOCs and provides the requisite foundation for the conduct of special operations as well as psychological operations and civil affairs.

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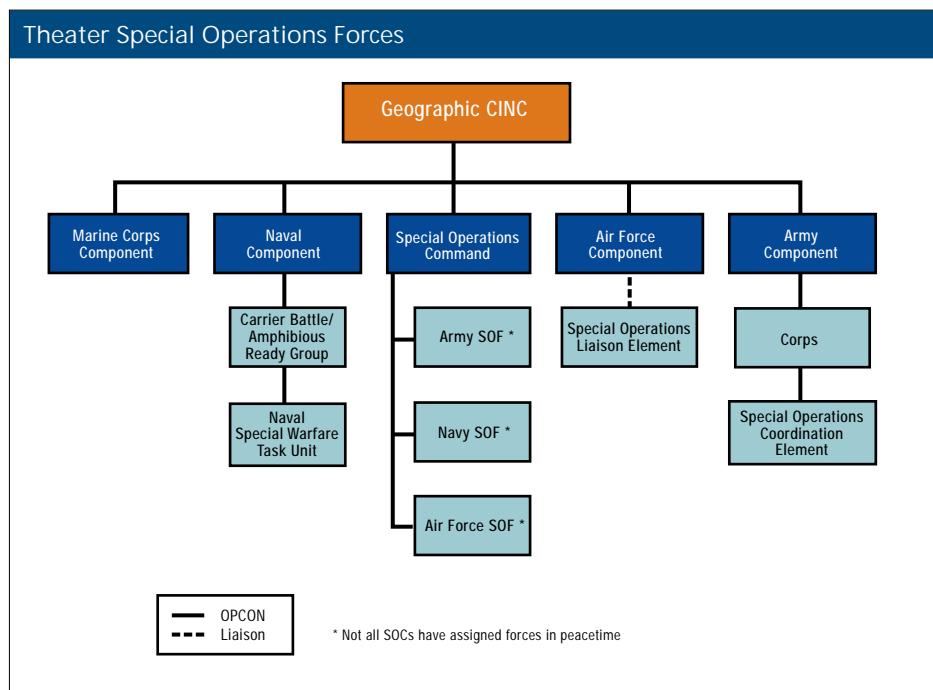
The special operations command (SOC) commander headed for Africa as a joint task force (JTF) commander. Liberia was in chaos, with well armed and often drugged or intoxicated gangs turning the streets of Monrovia into a free-fire zone. Diplomats, relief workers, and U.N. observers were trapped and in grave danger. Three key tasks surfaced: to establish a staging base in Sierra Leone for transporting the evacuees to a safe haven in Senegal, secure the U.S. embassy, and evacuate U.S. and third country nationals.

Reacting to a no-notice tasking order SOCEUR assembled forces at a staging base in Sierra Leone. The 352nd Special Operations Group from Mildenhall, England, deployed both fixed and rotary-wing support while MH-47Ds belonging to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment arrived from the United States. Theater-based conventional assets joined with Army Special Forces (SF), Navy SEALs, and Air Force special tactics personnel. The integration of joint SOF became apparent as personnel arrived at the airfield and were greeted by friends and acquaintances of long standing. Most SOCEUR staff members had served previous assignments with the operational units arriving in Sierra Leone, and virtually all the units involved had worked together. In the regionally oriented special operations community there are few strangers.

An air bridge was created from Monrovia to Freetown, Sierra Leone, which rescued 2,115 people from 71 countries. Special operations MH-53J

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and MH-47D helicopters tallied 354 hours in 65 sorties, with more than a third flown with night vision goggles. When the initial crisis was resolved by the evacuation of the highest threat areas, and unique SOF capabilities were no longer required, the SOCEUR commander transferred JTF responsibilities to a conventional commander and withdrew, thus completing a textbook case of modern SOF employment.



Consolidating SOF

The Cohen-Nunn amendment to the FY87 National Defense Authorization Act radically changed the way special operations forces were managed. It established the Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict and the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). A service-like organization took shape as responsibility for SOF was consolidated under SOCOM which eventually assumed control of all U.S.-based SOF. It held the purse strings with head of agency responsibility for the acquisition of SOF-unique matériel and a discrete funding line (major force program 11). In Cohen-Nunn, Congress recognized that the

things that make SOF different from conventional and strategic forces dictates a command structure which ensures cohesion and optimal use of limited resources.

The essence of SOCOM is joint interoperability which is approached in three dimensions. First, forces are

trained and equipped to work together. Second, a framework of joint doctrine and joint tactics, techniques, and procedures effectively guides SOF employment. Finally, standing organizations exist to ensure that the full utility of SOF is realized across the continuum of military operations. This article is focused on an aspect of this third dimension, theater SOCs and the need to develop them fully into the resources that they were intended to become—the special operations components of the theater combatant commands.

The geographic combatant commands established SOCs as subordinate unified commands in the 1980s. Moreover, U.S. Forces Korea set up an SOC to deal with SOF matters and forces on the peninsula. The commands evolved from various sources with roles that remain somewhat different. In general, each SOC exercises operational control of assigned forces, has responsibility for SOF-peculiar logistical requirements of assigned forces, and forms the core of a joint special operations task force able to act independently or as the special operations component of a larger joint/combined task force. Ultimately, the theater SOCs are responsible to CINCs for integrating and employing SOF in theater plans.

Implementation of Goldwater-Nichols relied on an updated, highly expanded body of doctrine that defined joint warfighting concepts. The basis of our current joint special operations capability is codified in five joint pubs.¹ The doctrinal roles of a theater SOC commander are to exercise operational control over joint SOF, to act as the principal advisor on special operations, and to be the joint force special operations component commander. Because special operations must be flexible and adaptable, joint doctrine gives the theater CINCs broad latitude in actually assigning and controlling SOF assets (see theater SOF structure in the accompanying figure). When appropriate, command and control of SOF may be carried out by other subordinate unified commands, JTFs, and service or functional component commands.

Growing Pains

The theater SOCs conduct peace operations, exercises, and combat operations. Those that belong to unified commanders in the European, Pacific, and Southern regions have forward-based and rotationally deployed SOF on a full-time basis. In the Central and Atlantic regions, however, SOCs employ CONUS-based forces to meet exercise and real-world commitments. Long-standing arrangements preclude some SOF from assignment to SOCs. Naval special warfare forces (SEAL platoons and special boat detachments) deploy integral to carrier battle or amphibious ready groups, and SEAL delivery vehicle units go to sea on designated submarines. Civil affairs and psychological operations responsibilities remain under the headquarters of the theater unified commands, though the preponderance of them are designated SOF by statute. In most cases, however, such assignments represent SOF operating in exclusive support of conventional force commanders.

Developing organizations have growing pains, and this was particularly true of SOCs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Without exception they were undermanned, and many members were young special operators inexperienced in staff work. In addition,

service component commands were not eager to loose either forces or missions which they felt completely capable of controlling. In many cases the reluctance to pass responsibilities to SOCs was not without foundation because it takes time and experience to develop a capable staff and fully functioning organization.

Congress sought to enhance the cohesion of theater SOF by mandating general or flag rank (one-star) officers as SOC commanders in Europe and

joint doctrine for SOF was tested with great success in virtually all regions

the Pacific, and later for the Central and Southern regions. Substantial improvement in SOC staff capability began in the early 1990s. Formal manpower reviews established war and peacetime requirements. Personnel increases were programmed, and SOCOM efforts to alleviate immediate shortfalls solved many pressing problems.

As the quality and quantity of SOC personnel increased, emerging joint SOF doctrine was tested in the varioius theaters during exercises and operations. The SOCs employed their organizational and planning skills in combat, humanitarian assistance, and counter-drug operations around the world. They proved their value to CINCs and became integral to the overall effort, thereby earning a place at the table. Today, SOCs manage major portions of peacetime engagement programs and are prepared to furnish unique capabilities. Several have responsibilities as standing rapid deployment task forces and as staffs for theater CINCs.

Coming of Age

Theater SOCs, through their commanders, staffs, and association with SOCOM, contribute depth of knowledge, experience, and expertise across a spectrum of special operations capabilities not otherwise replicated in theater. Routine operations present an entirely different and often more telling basis for evaluation. Each theater SOC plays a key role in peacetime engagement. In FY96, an average of 4,627 SOF personnel were

deployed in 65 countries each week. The preponderance operated under control of SOCs. Today, most forward based and deployed Army, Navy, and Air Force SOF operate as integrated joint forces to provide CINCs with unique, flexible capabilities. Moreover, they can exercise command and control over conventional assets ranging from submarines to special Marine air-ground task forces and aircraft from all services.

SOCOM focuses on ensuring that SOCs are properly resourced with relevant doctrine, personnel, matériel, and budgets to execute their roles in support of theater campaign plans. Theater SOCs have been agile and responsive

partners of conventional forces around the world as part of national military strategy. Assigned the full range of special operations missions and exercising the appropriate responsibilities, SOCs continue to demonstrate the synergy achievable any time and place through the routine integration of service SOF into a cohesive whole. By providing CINCs with unique assets to complement conventional forces, SOCs have come of age and have clearly demonstrated the soundness of a trained and ready joint force.

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NOTES

¹ Joint Pub 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, Joint Pub 3-05.3, *Joint Special Operations Operational Procedures*, Joint Pub 3-05.5, *Joint Special Operations Targeting and Mission Planning Procedures*, Joint Pub 3-53, *Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations*, and Joint Pub 3-57, *Doctrine for Joint Civil Affairs*.